

# Individualized Interventions: When Teachers Resist

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## Abstract

One of the most frustrating situations encountered by special needs professionals is when teachers are unwilling to carry out individualized reinforcement plans for children. Though they are clearly required by law to comply, some individuals still resist our most determined efforts at advocacy. The purpose of this paper is to examine some possible causes of such resistance, and to offer some suggestions for working with these troublesome individuals.

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Administrators, consultants, and other service personnel in the schools often encounter resistance to the use of idea of using a reinforcement program to intervene with inappropriate behaviors or poor academic performance. This attitude becomes a problem when the offenders undermine a potentially successful intervention, or even refuse outright to participate. As child advocates, we are then placed in a very frustrating position: how do we combat this brick wall of resistance? And do we even have the right to interfere, when it appears, as it sometimes does, to be a cultural phenomenon? The purpose of this article, then, is to discuss some of the causes of resistance to reinforcement programs, and to propose some means of coping with those who present this attitude.

## Reasons for Resistance

*“They should do it because they are supposed to do it!”*

Most people who assert this really mean, *“They should be afraid NOT to do it!”* In the United States, this belief has its roots deep in the traditions of its earliest European settlers. Many were religious zealots whose God was a wrathful and punishing being; the imminent danger of hell figured prominently in their daily life. The residue of this philosophy can be seen in much of our modern-day society; the basis for our criminal justice system, for example, is that a fear of punishment ought to be a deterrent. Our educational system also has a punitive focus. Many schools still employ corporal punishment, and it was not so long ago that children were humiliated with dunce caps and similar abuses.

Today the culprits are often teachers trained in a more directive, authoritarian model of teaching, or whose own upbringing was very punitive. These resistors are motivated by a fear of change and a need to cling to tradition; they also have a secret conviction that altering their style would be equivalent to condemning their own parents.

Sometimes it may be helpful to have a sympathetic conversation with them. Reflective listening, when we restate in our own words what the other person just said, is a good method for letting

them know that they were heard. This helps them to be less antagonistic and more open to other ideas. Agree with them: Yes, they should do this, but they aren't, are they? We have to get them there, and this is how we do it. These resistors may be willing to try your ideas if you can show them that as the appropriate behavior is established, the reinforcer would be faded so that eventually, the behavior would be sustained through naturally occurring events in the environment.

Some have interpreted the Bible as supporting their philosophy. They may vary the theme somewhat, to, "*It's not fair to the other kids!*" Those who are sincere in their religious beliefs can be given food for thought by a reference to the parable of the Prodigal Son; this dissolute runaway was welcomed home with a huge party, but his well-behaved brother was reprimanded for his lack of understanding.

In another variation on the previous theme, some will declare that, "*I never got rewarded!*" Here, loyalty to parents is the overriding factor. Their mantra is, What my parents did was right, and the subtext of this is, otherwise, I wouldn't be so perfect! Tradition and respect for parents, plus sometimes a bit of anger all play into the picture. It may be helpful to point out that their parents did the best they knew how, and would certainly have employed this "new research" if they had known about it.

*"They should just want to do it!"*

Some educators have been attracted to a philosophy that condemns any reinforcement as ultimately destructive. This attitude was fueled by a book entitled Punished by Rewards: The Trouble With Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes (Kohn, 1999). The theory behind this movement is that children should be rewarded by an internal satisfaction, or intrinsic motivation. Kohn frequently uses the word bribe as a synonym for reinforcement, and states that such extrinsic motivators destroy a child's naturally occurring intrinsic motivation.

In the first place, a bribe is actually quite different from a reinforcer. A bribe is given in advance of a desired behavior, in an attempt to influence someone to act in a particular way. Implied in this definition is that the requested behavior is in the briber's interest.

Reinforcers, on the other hand, always come after the behavior. Reinforcing wire makes the concrete sidewalk stronger; the big steel girder holding up the overpass may come to mind as well. In addition, the purpose of a reinforcer is to increase the probability of the behavior recurring in the future, which is not usually the scenario with a bribe. Finally, reinforcers are always designed to only follow behaviors occurring under explicit conditions.

In addition, Kohn (1999) describes reinforcement as "...to provide a reward for people when they act the way we want them to." (p. 4), implying that the behavior change is for our own benefit. Unless we are extremely unethical, the reinforced behavior is something that will be of direct positive benefit to the student, not to the person administering the reinforcement. It is not likely that those of us in the school setting would be successful in modifying a behavior that was only to our own benefit; it would certainly be noticed and reported by peers and other teachers. Of course, people inadvertently condition children to inappropriate behaviors all the time, but that kind of conditioning is why we need behavior modification in the first place!

Does an external reward destroy a person's internal motivation? We must first understand the nature of intrinsic motivation. There may be some people who are born with a lust for

knowledge, but most of us who are academically accomplished learned that knowledge is good, through being reinforced early on by our parents. Each time our parents praised us for singing the alphabet song, or holding up the correct number of fingers for our age, we were learning that knowledge is a good thing! We learned that our parents were pleased when we displayed more knowledge. They smiled, laughed, hugged us, bought us ice cream, gave us attention, urged us to display it to grandma. As we grew older, and this happened more and more frequently, we became conditioned to respond internally to learning events. This is an example of classical conditioning a la Ivan Pavlov, who inadvertently trained his laboratory dogs to salivate when a bell rang. Dr. Pavlov had a bell on the lab door which rang whenever he entered (usually to feed them); after a few weeks, they had associated the bell ringing with eating, to the degree that they had an automatic internal response whenever they heard it.

Those people who are “*intrinsically motivated*,” have actually been well trained to this response. Whenever they accomplish something for which they were frequently reinforced in the past, they re-experience the pleasure they got from that reinforcement. Thus, students who are intrinsically motivated to achieve are basically hearing their parents’ cheering in their head every time they earn a good grade.

So if a child is not already intrinsically motivated, what do we do? If you ask this of the teacher or parent who espouses this belief, they are usually stymied. Most will just repeat themselves. Once, when I was working with some particularly obstinate teachers, I said in exasperation, “*So, we just tie concrete blocks to their feet and dump them in the lake?*” This of course did little to advance my case, but it did relieve my feelings at the time.

Again, if we can put it in terms of their own belief system, we will have a better chance of getting them to do what we want – which is to help the child. We must listen to their position, which does have merit, and agree that it is best if the child is internally motivated. Then we must explain how we create that internal motivation: by implementing a reinforcement program! When we provide reinforcement for the desired behaviors on a consistent basis, over time, the behavior becomes paired with the good feelings associated with the external reinforcement. Once the behavior is established, we can fade the reinforcers, leaving the child, in the teacher’s terminology, intrinsically motivated.

It is also important to explain to them that, due to the length of time the child has behaved incorrectly, she will probably need some strong reinforcement to dislodge her from her habits. Thus, a gruff “*good job!*” from the teacher will not likely be sufficient at first.

## **Hidden Agenda**

This is the person who actually desires the failure of the intervention. It is important to tread carefully until you can determine what the person really wants. They may be attempting to have the child removed from their responsibility. There could be two reasons for this. One may be that they truly believe the child needs more intensive (special) services, which they do not feel competent to provide. They may be defensive that they have not been able to help the child; these people want everyone to reassure them that the child is indeed so faulty that they can’t be blamed for giving up.

For this teacher, the best route is to re-focus the consultation on the one thing everyone can agree upon: this child needs help! Keep re-focusing as needed. The teacher will probably respond to

sympathetic listening. Ask him to describe in detail all the things he has tried. Agree that he has tried many things, and reassure him that he has reason to feel frustrated. Then, move on to how do we help this child?

It is important to empower this teacher. Remind him how important he is to this child; he knows the child better than anyone else, he has the child's trust, and he is the child's best chance of help. Have a very structured plan ready, with every possibility accounted for. Then discuss how it could be incorporated into his classroom routine. Be willing to make reasonable changes so it will work better for him, but that won't materially affect the intervention. Assure him that you will help him get it started, and will be available to assist at any time along the way – then make sure that you follow through.

The second possibility is that the teacher has developed an animosity to the child. This is probably the hardest resistance to deal with. She may want the child punished in some way, or out of her room altogether. Either will make this teacher feel vindicated.

In this case, the child may remind her of someone else or some negative event. He may have an "*attitude*" that she finds particularly provoking. If so, get her to define "*attitude*." Try to ascertain specifically what it is about the child that is so offensive to her. Oftentimes the child has some oppositional behavior that the teacher finds particularly disrespectful, which she has countered with unenforceable demands, resulting in a standoff. If you can discover the specifics, you have leverage; this behavior should be the first target. If the teacher can be convinced that this behavior can be brought under control, she may perceive that she could "win" this battle. If this behavior can be modified, then you have opened the door to other interventions in her class.

## Conclusions: Reinforcement for the Implementers

The best method to ensure cooperation is to provide plenty of reinforcement for your implementers. Find ways to praise their participation, but make sure you do not come across as condescending. Send a note to their supervisor, mentioning their cooperation, and cc it to them. Reinforce small moves in the right direction.

Try to see things from their viewpoint, and work from there. We cannot move people into a different philosophical place by berating, demanding, or threatening; we can meet them where they are and walk along with them to better understanding.

## References

Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Houghton Mifflin: New York

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